

Reaching Muslim People with the Gospel

Ishak Ibrahim

In any attempt to evangelize Muslims today, we can hardly afford the mistakes of the past. One of our greatest mistakes has been that of not sufficiently taking into account cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and sociological factors in the background of the people. Nor can we afford the luxury of ancient but erroneous prejudices against the Muslim world.

Perhaps the most damaging mistake of all has been our neglect of Muslims. Hiding behind excuses such as "monolithic Islam," and "Muslims are resistant to the gospel," we have invested less than two percent of North American Protestant missionaries in reaching Muslims. There has been little sowing; there has been little reaping.

The Muslim world, however, has been subjected to the secularizing influences of the West. Past Western domination of present-day independent Muslim nations has not helped the Christian mission, but it did transmit Western ideas and values to a whole generation of Muslim elite.

Some observers felt that these secularizing influences, which have eroded the faith of many in the West in Christ, might well erode Islamic beliefs, too. Little did they suspect the opposite reaction, a revival within Islam in reaction to the secularizing influence of the West.

And yet, in the midst of our miscalculations, prejudices and neglect, I believe God has made this the hour for Muslim evangelism. Surprising stories from Muslim countries tell us of unprecedented events in the evangelization of Muslims. They reveal that the Muslim world is not everywhere resistant. They give hope to the Church to redeem her neglect, to erase her prejudices, and to turn back from former mistakes.

The Ideological Struggle In The Muslim World—God's Opportunity

We have observed an increase in Islamic militancy in recent years. In Algeria, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, Libya and Sudan, militant movements are spreading. Ironically, even though most Muslim nations are the signatories of the U.N.'s Declaration on Human Rights, they interpret that declaration in a distinctive way. They reason that since Islam is a total way of life, the people of a given nation are free under Islam, and since God's law is above human laws and declarations, whatever Islam says is right.

In the midst of this kind of struggle and anxiety, the Christian gospel can be very attractive. Militants struggle

Ishak Ibrahim was born in Egypt and has travelled extensively throughout the Middle East.

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against what they perceive to be a virtual crusade of corrupt Western values. Other leaders are looking for stability. We should be watching for stress points in the ideological struggles of the Muslim world. Rather than pulling our people out of such situations, we need to persevere as witnesses. In Iran, for example, a young believer recently led twenty people to Christ in a period of six months! In America, where many Iranians have been stranded by the present government, there are Iranian converts to Christ in almost every major city. Stress produces openness. Restless hearts in search of meaning and peace are finding their rest in Christ.

The Use of the Qur'an as a Bridge

It is of particular relevance to Muslim evangelism to examine the Scriptures and what they show about culturally-sensitive approaches to other people. Jesus' approach is especially suggestive. He did not come to preach Judaism, nor did he come to preach salvation through the Law. Yet he never attacks the Law. Rather he shows the Jews that the Law was in fact pointing to him.

Is there a similar way in which we can use the Qur'an with Muslims? Before I answer, I must make it clear that in no way do I equate the Qur'an with the Old Testament. I am merely making an analogy. The vast majority of Muslims take the Qur'an to be the direct word of God. We should meet them where they are.

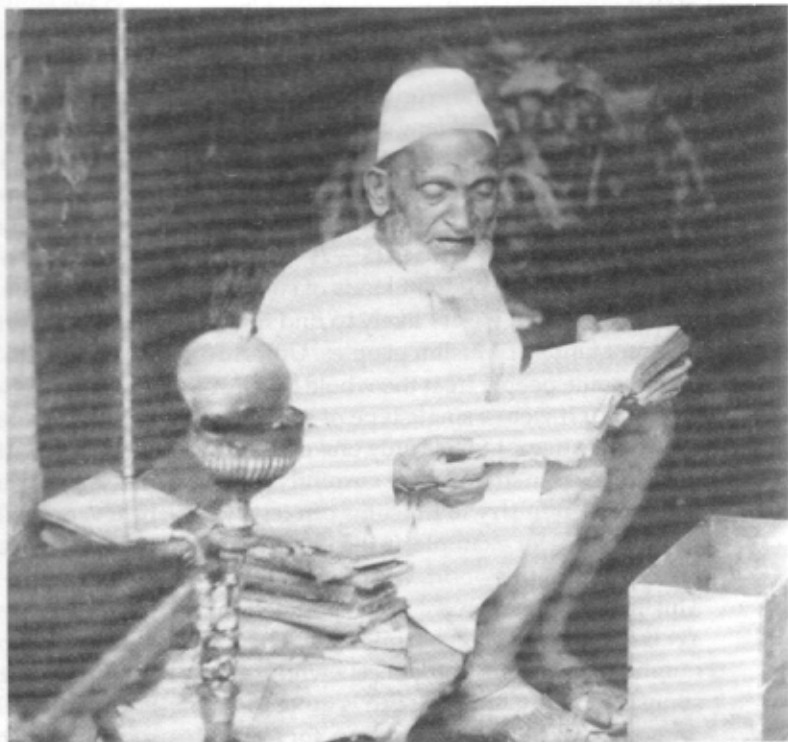
The Qur'an contains some magnificent verses about Jesus. So exhilarating and glorifying are these stories that from its pages we see Jesus as the greatest prophet and in a special way close to God. This could not be called the "gospel in the Qur'an," but it nevertheless gives the Christian an excellent opportunity to talk to Muslims about Christ.

I am personally convinced that the prophet Muhammad was confused in his understanding of who

Jesus was. On the one hand he denied his deity and crucifixion. On the other hand, Jesus is called *Kalamet Allah*, "the Word of God" (4:171), and *Rouh Allah*, "the Spirit of God" (2:87). Jesus is significantly quoted as saying, "His (God's) blessing is upon me wherever I go" (19:30). A better translation would be "He (God) has made me blessed wherever I may be." Also, in the Qur'an, Jesus is the only prophet who raises the dead. There is also mention of his miracles and healings and his miraculous virgin birth.

I believe the Qur'an can be used to bring Muslims to the feet of Jesus. Virtually all converts from Islam say that the God they knew distantly in the Qur'an they now know more fully in Jesus Christ. As Jesus and his apostles were able to point to the gospel from the Old Testament, so we can point our Muslim friends to Jesus from the Qur'an.

I know someone will say, "But Muslim teachers and leaders do not believe that Jesus is elevated to deity in the Qur'an." This is true. But back in the first century, neither did the Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders accept Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. Yet the gospel nevertheless spread among those who responded



to Christian preaching. Using the Qur'an as a bridge, we can reach Muslims who have been prepared by God to see Jesus as the one he has sent for their redemption.

The Islamic Monolith: Fact or Fancy?

Underlying our concern for culturally-sensitive models is the awareness of the rich diversity within Islam. Muslims are divided into hundreds of "homogeneous units" that differ from each other geographically, ethnically, ideologically, culturally, and often theologically. Iran, for example, cannot be called a monolithic society. Ethnic Persians make up only 48 percent of the population. Eight percent of Iran's population is Kurdish, 19 percent Turkish-speaking, 18 percent tribal Gulani, Baluchi, and Luri, and the remaining are divided among many smaller groups. Religiously, Iran's Muslims are divided into Shias, Sunnis, Bahais, Ismailis, Ahl-i-Haqq, Yezidis, communists, secularists, and both progressive and conservative Muslims. This kind of diversity can be observed in dozens of Muslim countries.

Other examples of surprising diversity are the 20,000 Chinese Muslims who have migrated and presently live in Saudi Arabia, 145,000 Kurds living in Kuwait, and 20,000 Circassian Muslims living in Jordan. The one billion Muslims of the world speak at least five hundred different languages and are subdivided into probably 3,500 different homogeneous units.

Differing Kinds of Soils—A Clue

Just as there were different kinds of soil in Jesus' parable, so we are likely to find many different kinds of Muslim peoples. Unfortunately, some people treat the whole Muslim world as if it were a single type of soil and erroneously attempt to use only one method on it. It is not, as many who are currently involved in a ministry to Muslims can testify.

Indonesia, for example, is the largest Muslim country in the world, with 195 million Muslims (over 80 percent of the population). Yet Indonesia is not an Islamic state. The number of Muslims in Indonesia who are responsive to the Christian faith is quite astounding. The Sundanese of Java, for ex-

ample, long considered resistant to the gospel, are of varying levels in their commitment to Islam. Some areas are highly orthodox and resistant to Christianity. Others are far less Islamicized. House churches have been successfully planted in nonresistant areas.

The point is that we can find responsive people (good soil) even in the world's most populous Muslim nation. This does not mean we should neglect the unresponsive segment of the population. But it does mean that we should invest our greatest efforts on the fruitful ground and encourage our converts, who appreciate the reasons for resistance to the gospel, to evangelize the less responsive areas. And we must simultaneously experiment with new strategies.

Opportunities for Cross-Cultural Workers of All Nationalities

Sometimes we can learn from our Muslim friends. For example, there is a growing effort by Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries to strengthen the growth of orthodox Islam within Indonesia. Most of the missionaries in that movement are Cairo-trained Arabs sent to Indonesia to teach the Arabic language and Islamic theology.

A suggested strategy, in this case, would be to send Arab Christians as missionaries to these heavily populated Muslim islands of Indonesia. They, too, can teach Arabic, and preach the gospel. They will be very acceptable because it is prestigious to be an Arabic-speaking person.

Korean Christians are having a great impact upon the Muslims in Saudi Arabia. Saudis expect the adherents of the Greek, Coptic, and Syrian orthodox churches along with the Armenians to be Christians. They expect the Americans, Germans and British to be at least nominally Christians. But what is baffling to them is how the Koreans, having no Christian background or history, can be dedicated believers in Christ. What could be more significant than a Korean mission in Saudi Arabia, in the form of technical advisors, laborers, doctors, engineers, etc.?

In the aftermath of the oil boom and the rumble of war, the Arabian Gulf States have been greatly shaken. Cultural, economic, and sociological change should be viewed very

seriously by missionary-minded people. The cultural distortion and disorientation is proving to be fertile ground for Christians with sensitive testimony.

The influx of foreigners to the Gulf area, from India, Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Lebanon, Europe and America, now exceeds the population of the nationals. Among these people are a sizable number of Christians. In Kuwait, for example, it is estimated that five percent of the population is Christian. In Bahrain, about two percent of the population are Christians; in Qatar, over two percent; in Abu Dhabi, about four percent; in Dubai, a little over three percent. Mind you, the vast majority of these Christians are foreigners. There are very few Christian nationals, if any. The largest Christian community by far in the Arabian Gulf area is the Indian Christian community. It is estimated that over 30 percent of all Indians living in the Arabian Gulf are Christians. This can be, in my judgment, one of the greatest opportunities for Indian missionaries.

Conclusion

One billion Muslims cannot be forgotten by the Church. We must not spare any effort to make the gospel relevant to Islam's various ethnic units.

When Jesus was asked "Which is the greatest commandment of the law?" He replied by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

But Jesus added a highly significant clause not found in Deuteronomy, "with all your mind." For full Christian missionary commitment, it is necessary not only to dedicate ourselves to evangelism; but also to think through the most effective way in which we can carry out Christ's command.

The apostle Paul planned and thought out the best way to allow the gospel to make its maximum impact. We need to plan Muslim evangelism with the same thoroughness. Let us adopt the appropriate means to produce a rich harvest in the Muslim world in our day.

Study Questions

1. What are some of the most convincing facts that have led Ishak Ibrahim to believe this is God's hour for Muslim evangelism?
2. Which aspects of strategy in this article are unique to Muslim evangelism?

